
CURRENT TRENDS IN ACADEMIC SOCIAL WORK TRAINING – A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Radu-Mihai DUMITRESCU¹

Adrian-Nicolae DAN²

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Abstract: Undergraduate social work education is evolving through the integration of social responsibility, holistic student support, educational partnerships and the use of digital technologies. Programmes emphasise social justice and a culture of non-violence, ensuring adequate professional and ethical training. Psychological and social support becomes a priority for student success, and collaboration with employers and alumni helps improve training. The digitalisation of education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, offers new opportunities for teaching and learning. Review-type analyses can provide insight into current trends in university training programmes. The present research, although limited in scope, manages to identify a number of key directions for academic training in social work. Current courses reflect contemporary issues by addressing social responsibility, poverty alleviation, mental health and technology. Professional ethics and the need for educational standards tailored to the diversity of students are emphasised. Anti-poverty strategies are integrated into programmes to provide effective solutions. Mental health becomes increasingly important, including innovative interventions such as animal-assisted therapy. The use of technology in social work education contributes to improved learning. Courses on digital social innovation, mental health, social entrepreneurship and soft skills development are recommended. Digitisation in social care is becoming essential and training on topics such as cyber safety and social networking can support modern interventions. Adapting the

¹ Associate Professor, MD PhD, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, Medcover Romania, e-mail: dum_mihu@yahoo.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4481-394X>

² Associate Professor, PhD, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, 050107 Bucharest, Romania; adrian.dan@unibuc.ro

curriculum is essential to meet today's social needs and to train competent professionals. This process must take into account changes in the field, labour market requirements and the integration of interdisciplinary perspectives. A well-structured programme ensures an adequate preparation for future social workers, providing them with the necessary competences to respond effectively to community challenges.

Keywords: *social work education, new trends, curriculum, interdisciplinary approach, innovation, digitisation, social responsibility*

Introduction

The field of social work education has seen significant developments in recent years, particularly in response to global challenges and the need for more effective training methods. A comprehensive review of recent literature can reveal several key themes and findings that are crucial to understanding the current landscape of social work education. One prominent theme is the need for reform in social work training programmes; more and more authors are emphasising the importance of social work training in terms of professional development that encourages active participation in policy formulation and programme development, highlighting the need for educational institutions to take a more proactive approach in reforming curricula to better serve their communities (Erasmus & Bloem, 2023). Increasingly, there is advocacy for collaborative efforts in curriculum development and exchanges between faculties to enhance cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness in social work education (Adewusi et al., 2024). Such reforms are essential for preparing future social workers to effectively address the complex dimensions of global challenges.

Integrating practice experience through field placements is increasingly recognised as a critical component of social work education. The importance of training by placing future professionals in an environment in which they will work and its impact on learning outcomes is discussed, suggesting that high quality internships are vital for professional development (Caspersen & Smeby, 2020). A combination of traditional, classroom-based learning and practical, field-based applications enriches the educational experience by helping students internalise the core values of social work (Butler-Warke & Bolger, 2020). The significance of field-

based education as a pedagogical norm is also reinforced by critical observations about the need for practice experiences and their unpaid ethical implications for the social work profession (Drechsler, Beasley, & Singh, 2023).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social work education has prompted a reassessment of traditional teaching methods. Discussions of the challenges and opportunities presented by distance learning during the pandemic are topical, noting that while there are obstacles to achieving educational goals, there is also potential for innovative pedagogical strategies. This reflects a broader trend in the literature, which argues the need for social work education to adapt to contemporary challenges through the lens of complexity theory, ensuring that educational practices remain relevant and effective (McDermott, 2021).

Objectives

The main objective of the paper was to identify new trends in the literature in the field of social work undergraduate education. The elements we took into consideration were: the changing directions of undergraduate education, the themes and topics covered in newly introduced courses, the basic aspects that are retained in professional training, emerging topics of study and curricular issues. The secondary objective was to attempt a bibliometric analysis of the papers analysed.

Research Methodology

The literature review was carried out by querying the Google Scholar database using combinations of descriptors: „new trends”, „current trends”, „social work training”, „university education”, „higher education”, „main topics”, „themes”, „university courses”, „proposals” and „curricula”. A total of 108 results were subjected to a content analysis (title, abstract and keywords) following relevance-based selection by the search engine. Subsequently, 24 papers were included in this narrative review. The qualitative content analysis is summarised in appended table. Bibliometric data were entered into the VoSviwer programme. Keyword analysis was a separate step.

Results and Discussions

1. Current directions of development of university education in social work

The evolution of undergraduate education in social work is increasingly characterised by a focus on social responsibility, supporting students through a variety of means and integrating innovative pedagogical approaches. This multi-dimensional development reflects a growing recognition of the need for universities to prepare students not only academically, but also socially and ethically prepared for their roles in social work in a rapidly changing society.

One significant direction is the emphasis on social responsibility, even in teacher training programmes; university training should foster a commitment to social justice and a culture of non-violence, core values for future social work teachers (Valdivia, Palomino, & Burgos-Garcia, 2020). This is aligned by work that discusses the importance of social work students acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively contribute to community well-being (Shah, 2020). The integration of social responsibility into university educational frameworks is crucial for the development of professionals who are not only competent in their fields but also aware of their social impact in the community; thus, a real awareness of the complex social role of the social worker can be achieved without which sustainable wellbeing of both professionals and service recipients cannot be generated.

Holistic student support is becoming a priority in academic settings; the literature emphasises the importance of both academic and social support systems to facilitate student success, particularly through programmes that encourage social integration (Naidoo, Byles, & Kwenait, 2021). Another dimension is that which advocates for psychological support models that address students' personal and professional development, thereby enhancing their overall educational experience (Postavnev, Alisov, Postavneva, Podymova, & Ginting, 2020). Such initiatives are essential to address the various challenges faced by students in social work programmes, ensuring they are well prepared for future roles.

The role of social partnerships in modernising education is gaining momentum. There is increasing discussion about how collaborative approaches between universities, employers and graduates can improve the training of future social work professionals (Sadykova, 2024). This partnership model not only aligns educational outcomes with labour market needs, but also fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility among social work stakeholders.

Incorporating digital technologies and innovative teaching methods is another critical trend. The shift towards e-learning and the use of social networking for educational purposes have been highlighted as vital tools for engaging students and improving learning outcomes (Yasa, 2022). This was particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a rapid transition to distance learning. This transition, although challenging, has also opened up new avenues for educational delivery and student engagement (Bulatova et al., 2021).

Current directions in undergraduate social work education reflect a comprehensive approach that integrates social responsibility, holistic student support, collaborative partnerships and innovative teaching methodologies. These developments are essential for preparing future professionals who are equipped with the skills and knowledge to address the complex social issues they will encounter in their careers.

2. Main topics and themes covered in the latest courses introduced in social work faculties

Courses recently introduced in social work faculties worldwide reflect a dynamic response to contemporary social issues, emphasising themes such as social responsibility, poverty reduction, mental health and the integration of technology in social work education. These themes are essential in preparing students to address the complexities of social work in a rapidly changing world.

One of the prominent themes is the focus on social responsibility and ethical practice in social work education; social responsibility should be a core component of undergraduate programmes, highlighting the need for future educators to engage with issues of social justice and ethical standards (Valdivia et al., 2020). Other findings emphasise the importance of evolving educational standards to prioritise outcomes that reflect social

responsibility, particularly in the context of diverse student populations (Morley & Clarke, 2020). Integrating these principles into course content is essential to fostering engagement with ethical practice among students.

The reduction of poverty and social inequality remain central topics in social work education, with courses increasingly addressing the complexities of these two interrelated phenomena in both rich and poor countries. They discuss the effectiveness of social assistance programmes in reducing child poverty, highlighting the need for targeted approaches that can be adapted to different socio-economic contexts (Cai & Smeeding, 2019). The shift in social protection strategies from simply maintaining incomes and reducing inequality to broader socioeconomic development, which is increasingly embedded in social assistance programmes (Cruz-Martínez, 2019), is precisely a practical approach that departs from the general idea of increasing equality, opportunity and reducing poverty. This development reflects a recognition of the multiple nature of poverty and the need for comprehensive strategies to combat it.

Mental health is another critical area that is present in recent courses in many university programmes. The integration of animal-assisted interventions in educational settings is gaining increasing prominence, acting as a means to improve student well-being and social interaction (Rothkopf & Schworm, 2021). Research indicates that such interventions can significantly improve mental health outcomes for students, making them a valuable component of social support programmes (Parbery-Clark, Lubamba, Tanner, & McColl, 2021). This approach aligns with the wider trend to incorporate holistic support mechanisms into social work education, recognising the importance of mental health in social work practice.

The role of technology in social work education is increasing; the use of social networks and digital platforms for educational purposes is becoming more and more widespread. The transformative impact of social networks on communication and learning in higher education is discussed (Babić, Vilović, & Tomić, 2020). This trend has become particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has necessitated a rapid shift to online learning environments (Bulatova et al., 2021). Adapting educational methodologies to include digital tools becomes essential for preparing students to effectively engage with contemporary social issues.

3. Core elements of social work undergraduate courses

The core elements of undergraduate courses in social work have remained relatively consistent over the years, reflecting core values and competences essential for effective social work practice. These elements encompass a variety of themes, with particular emphasis on social justice, fostering community involvement, ethical practice (respect for the inherent dignity and worth of the person) and interdisciplinary approaches.

Courses that focus on social justice usually include discussions of the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion, which are crucial to understanding the systemic issues affecting marginalised populations. This approach is in line with a number of findings that emphasise the importance of integrating central aspects of critical race theory into social work education to address the structural inequities faced by historically oppressed communities (Fariña et al., 2021). Critical race theory is a significant framework for analysing and addressing systemic racism and its implications in different domains, particularly in education. With roots in legal studies, the theory posits that race is a social construct that shapes societal structures and individual experiences, particularly for marginalised communities. This theoretical approach emphasises the importance of narratives and counter-narratives, enabling individuals in these communities to articulate their lived experiences and challenge dominant narratives that often perpetuate racial inequities (Kelly, 2023; Lynn & Parker, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Such discussions are vital to the preparation of students, who learn to advocate for social change and understand the complexities of social work in broader societal contexts

Mobilising, involving and empowering communities are other fundamental elements of social work training and education. Education and training programmes often require students to participate in fieldwork or community service, enabling them to apply theoretical knowledge in real settings. This experiential learning underlines the importance of community social programmes in fostering community engagement and increasing social well-being (Chan, Ryan, & Quarter, 2016). Involving students in community practice not only enriches their learning experiences, but also reinforces the importance of collaboration and partnership in social work.

Ethical practice is also a critical theme that courses consistently address. Students are taught the ethical standards and responsibilities that govern

social work practice, which include confidentiality, informed consent and the importance of professional integrity. This is particularly relevant in light of the ongoing challenges in social work, discussing the need for practitioners to address complex ethical dilemmas in their work (Öktem & Erdogan, 2019). The focus on ethics ensures that future social workers are adequately trained to handle sensitive situations with professionalism and respect for the dignity and rights of the people with whom they interact.

Interdisciplinary approaches are increasingly recognised as essential in social work education. Courses often incorporate perspectives from psychology, sociology, public health and economics to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence social well-being. An increasing number of studies discuss the role of social welfare programmes in supporting community well-being, particularly in the context of economic challenges (Rahmawati et al., 2022). By integrating knowledge across disciplines, students are better prepared to develop holistic solutions to social problems.

These themes, as well as several others, old and new (e.g. ecological social work), are fundamental to equip students with the skills and knowledge to effectively address the challenges they face in social work. The prioritisation of curricular themes, the introduction or removal of some of them must become an active and evaluative process in order to maintain the relevance of social work student preparation with today's dynamic social life landscape.

4. Emerging topics and themes in social work training

In the evolving landscape of social work education, it is essential to introduce innovative courses and topics that reflect the current needs of society and prepare future social workers for the complexity of their roles. Based on recent literature, some valuable suggestions for courses or topics can be identified, focusing on areas such as digital social innovation, mental health interventions, social entrepreneurship and the integration of technology in social work practice.

An important area for course development is digital social innovation. Increasingly, the need for school social workers to respond effectively to crises and threats, particularly in the context of digital environments, is

emphasised (Marzano, Lizut, & Ochoa, 2019). Courses that focus on digital competencies, including the development of cyber safety programmes and the use of social media for psychosocial interventions, would equip students with the necessary skills to navigate contemporary challenges in the school environment and beyond. This aligns with the growing recognition of the role of technology in improving social work practice.

Another critical topic is mental health and well-being. A body of work highlights the evolving nature of hospital social care, requiring programmes to reflect the latest developments in mental health interventions (Muskat, Anthony, Mishna, & Greenblatt, 2018). Courses covering trauma-informed care, crisis intervention strategies and integration of mental health services into social care programmes are becoming of particular importance. This focus is particularly relevant given the increasing prevalence of mental health problems among diverse populations, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social entrepreneurship is also a vital area for inclusion in the course curriculum. It discusses the role of community social workers as social entrepreneurs, highlighting innovative models of care that can be implemented within social service agencies (Nouman & Cnaan, 2023). Courses exploring the principles of social entrepreneurship, including coalition building, advocacy and resource development, would empower future social workers to create sustainable solutions to social problems. This approach not only encourages innovation but also encourages a proactive attitude in addressing community needs.

In addition, integrating training in acquiring or improving communication and soft skills is essential for preparing social workers to engage effectively with clients and colleagues. Research indicates a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and social innovation, suggesting that lectures that focus on emotional intelligence, communication skills and conflict resolution could improve social workers' professional capabilities (Khalaf, 2022). Such training would be beneficial in fostering empathic and effective practitioners who can navigate the complexities of human interactions in their future work.

The use of online educational resources and platforms for training future social workers is increasingly relevant. We can identify work that highlights the potential of open online courses to broaden the professional

experience of social workers (Savelchuk, Andriichuk, & Bybyk, 2022). Incorporating online learning modules that cover different aspects of social work practice, including innovative service delivery models and community engagement strategies, would provide students with flexible and accessible learning opportunities.

5. Social work training curricula

Paying particular attention to the undergraduate social work curriculum is crucial for a number of reasons, including the need to adapt to evolving societal challenges, the importance of preparing competent professionals and the need to integrate diverse perspectives in social work education. These factors collectively emphasise the importance of a well-structured, adapted and responsive curriculum.

First, the dynamic nature of societal challenges requires social work programmes to remain relevant and responsive. It is evident that social work education has undergone significant changes to embrace a generalist model that prioritises the person-in-environment paradigm, reflecting the need for practitioners to address complex social problems effectively (Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020). This adaptability is essential for preparing students to deal with contemporary challenges such as poverty, inequality, and mental health crises, which have been exacerbated by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Apostol, Irimescu, & Rădoi, 2023). By focusing on current issues, curricula can equip students with the knowledge and skills to effectively respond to the needs of diverse populations.

Second, the training of competent professionals is paramount in social work. A growing body of evidence emphasises the importance of high-impact educational practices, such as group work, in developing the values and skills necessary for effective social work practice (Ericksen & Williamson-Ashe, 2021). Involving students in collaborative learning experiences fosters critical thinking, empathy and communication skills that are essential for successful interactions with beneficiaries and communities. In addition, the integration of hands-on experiences, is vital for developing competence through practice and deliberate feedback (Ossais et al., 2021). This hands-on approach ensures that students are well prepared on graduation for the realities of social work practice.

In addition, integrating diverse perspectives into social work education is crucial for promoting more inclusive and equitable practice. The emphasis on anti-oppressive approaches reflects the need for curricula to address issues of injustice and inequality in social work practice (Amadasun, 2020). By incorporating diverse cultural, social and political perspectives, curricula can prepare students to engage with beneficiaries from diverse backgrounds and effectively advocate for social change. This is particularly relevant in the context of globalisation, where social workers have to operate in a complex landscape of cultural differences and power dynamics.

Moreover, incorporating emerging topics, such as the integration of technology into social work practice, is increasingly important. Incorporating disaster response components into the curriculum can improve student preparedness for extreme events and crises (Wu, 2021). This advanced approach ensures that social work education remains relevant in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

Paying increased attention to the undergraduate social work curriculum is essential for adapting to societal challenges, preparing competent professionals, integrating diverse perspectives and embracing emerging themes. A responsive and comprehensive curriculum not only enhances the educational experience for students, but ultimately contributes to the effectiveness and relevance of social work practice in addressing the complex needs of individuals and communities.

6. Bibliometric and keyword analysis

The bibliometric analysis of the set of articles on current trends in undergraduate social work education and training does not reveal any co-authorship or keyword correlations, this can be explained by several factors. There may be thematic fragmentation and lack of common direction; social work is an interdisciplinary field and the topics covered can be very diverse (e.g. social policy, professional practice, ethics, digitisation, digitalisation, practice training, curriculum, etc.) Each researcher or team may work on niche topics, making it difficult to identify consistent groups of co-authors or a common set of keywords. Co-authorship networks may be underdeveloped and under-strengthened. Authors in the field of social work education and training may publish

individually or in small teams without extensive collaborations. Without well-developed academic networks, no significant clusters will emerge in co-authorship analyses. Inconsistent use of keywords seems to be a practical situation present here. Authors use different terms for similar concepts, which reduces the chances of correlation between keywords. For example, „social education” vs. „social work training” may denote similar issues but are labelled differently. Using clear standards for the choice of keywords makes it possible to group relevant items correctly. Regional and contextual differences are particularly important in the field analysed. Studies on social work education are influenced by national specificities: educational policies, structure of university programmes, research priorities. The size and quality of the dataset can be an important vulnerability in review analyses. If the number of articles analysed is small, relationships between authors or concepts may not be evident

Although bibliometric analysis could not be performed, keyword analysis identifies several relevant aspects. In terms of frequency and main themes, keywords are organised into several areas of interest such as:

- Education for sustainable development: „education for sustainable development”, „sustainability”, „United Nations Sustainable Development Goals”, „global learning”.
- International and Comparative Education: „internationalisation of the curriculum”, „PISA Global Competence Framework”, „Comparative Analysis”, „foreign countries”, „student attitudes”.
- Professional and interdisciplinary education: „professional education”, „interdisciplinary approach”, „higher education”, „graduate students”, „undergraduate students”, „student participation”, „innovation”.
- Social justice and decolonisation: „social justice”, „decolonisation”, „epistemologies”, „anti-oppressive education”, „social empowerment”.
- Education and curriculum policy: „curriculum policy”, „curricular and instructional policies”, „curriculum reform”, „problem-solving skills”.

- Social work and social policy: „social work education”, „green social work”, „social welfare”, „social protection”, „policy”, „telebehavioural health training”.
- Distance education and pedagogy: „distance education”, „pedagogy”, „e-simulations”, „high impact practices”, „collaborative learning”, „teaching methods”.
- Global change and environment: „climate change”, „disasters”, „green social work”, „KZN floods”.
- Evaluation of educational programmes: „programme assessment”, „field education”, „skills assessment”, „COVID-19”.

Another perspective is the logical connection between the terms used. Education for sustainable development is linked to social justice and climate change („sustainability”, „green social work”, „social justice”). Internationalisation of the curriculum is linked to comparative education and intercultural competence development („intercultural competence development”, „PISA Global Competence Framework”, „business education”, „global learning”). Professional and interdisciplinary education intersects with curriculum policy and educational assessment („higher education”, „professionalisation”, „educational quality”, „student surveys”). Social work appears in multiple contexts, including social policy, education and health („social work education”, „social protection”, „telebehavioural health training”, „leadership”, „collaboration”). Decolonisation and alternative epistemologies are associated with social justice and curriculum reform („decolonisation”, „epistemologies”, „social-justice”, „anti-oppressive education”, „social change”). Distance education and modern pedagogical methods are linked to innovation and the impact of technology on education („distance education”, „e-simulations”, „teaching methods”, „collaborative learning”). COVID-19 and educational assessment suggest a concern for the impact of pandemics on training („programme assessment”, „skills assessment”, „field education”).

Entries marked „N.A.” (as can be seen in the Appendix) indicate a lack of specific information or categories (keywords); although these papers were included in the narrative review, they could not be analysed by keywords. Libya and Ethiopia are mentioned in an educational and political context, suggesting an analysis of educational systems or policies in these countries.

„Revisioning” is an isolated word, which suggests a process of re-imagining education, but without a common context for multiple articles. There is an overlap between education for sustainable development, social education and curriculum policies, indicating a holistic approach in studying these topics.

Conclusions

This review, although limited in terms of the number of papers included in the analysis, has managed to identify a number of current trends in social work education. Further analyses, using a systematic methodology, will be able to better orient us towards quality professional training adapted to society's current needs

Integrating social responsibility into undergraduate education - The training of future social workers places an increasing emphasis on social justice, a culture of non-violence and an awareness of their impact in the community. These issues are essential to prepare professionals who not only have technical skills but also a deep understanding of their social role.

Holistic student support and educational partnerships - It is becoming increasingly clear that universities need to develop both academic and psychosocial support mechanisms to facilitate student integration and success. Partnerships between universities, employers and graduates also help to better adapt training programmes to professional realities and labour market needs.

Adoption of digital technologies and innovative teaching methods - The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition to e-learning, highlighting the importance of digitisation of university education. The use of new technologies and interactive teaching methods play a significant role in enhancing the educational experience and student engagement. Curricula need to promote inclusive approaches and include emerging topics, such as the use of technology and disaster response, to ensure relevant training in a globalised and digitised world.

Adapting social work programmes to today's challenges - New courses introduced in social work faculties reflect an increased concern for social responsibility, mental health, poverty reduction and the integration of technology in education. These themes are central to the training of

future social workers, enabling them to respond effectively to emerging social problems.

Expanding educational approaches through innovation and interdisciplinarity - New trends in social work education include both innovative methods, such as animal-assisted interventions, and the use of digital technologies and social networks as teaching tools. These changes enhance both the educational experience and the practical preparation of students.

Orientation of education towards a holistic approach to social work - Training programmes place increased emphasis on student well-being and the development of key competences to combat social inequalities. This emphasises the need for a balance between academic theory and practical applicability in diverse social and economic contexts.

Continuity and adaptability of fundamentals - Undergraduate social work courses retain a number of core themes such as social justice, community involvement, ethical practice and interdisciplinary approaches. They ensure the development of the competences needed for effective social intervention, while the integration of new concepts, such as ecological social work, reflects the adaptability of the field to new social realities.

Experiential learning and interdisciplinarity as pillars of training - Undergraduate programmes place an increasing emphasis on practical learning through fieldwork and community service, giving students the opportunity to apply theory in real-life contexts. In addition, the integration of perspectives from sociology, psychology, public health and economics enables them to develop holistic solutions to complex social problems.

The need for continuous updating of the curriculum - In order to maintain the relevance of social work education, it is essential to constantly re-evaluate the content of courses so that they reflect the current challenges of society. By adapting programmes to social, economic and technological changes, universities can ensure that future social workers are adequately prepared. Social work programmes need to be dynamic and responsive to current issues such as poverty, inequality and mental health crises in order to prepare students to intervene effectively in complex social contexts.

The importance of developing social-emotional competences - The training of social workers should include the development of communication, emotional intelligence and conflict resolution skills, as these contribute to creating professionals who are empathic and able to manage complex interactions with clients and colleagues.

Use of technology in education and practice - Online educational resources and digital platforms offer flexible learning opportunities and allow social workers to access innovative models of intervention, thus contributing to training that is more relevant to the demands of today's profession.

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