

# Research Trends in Career-Oriented Education for Social Work Students in the Context of Digital Transformation

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20793039>

Published Date: 22-June-2026

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**Abstract:** Studies conducted both domestically and internationally indicate that career education, employment trends and digital transformation in higher education have attracted considerable scholarly attention from various perspectives. Existing research has contributed to clarifying the theoretical foundations of career development, professional identity, career adaptability, career management competencies and the role of career education in higher education training processes (Brown & Lent, 2019; Savickas et al., 2009; Bridgstock, 2009). At the same time, numerous studies have emphasized that under the influence of digital transformation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, higher education needs to shift from a knowledge-transmission model to a comprehensive competency-development model for learners, particularly focusing on digital competence, career adaptability skills and lifelong learning capacity (UNESCO, 2021; Redecker & Punie, 2017).

**Keywords:** research; career-oriented education; social work.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the extensive body of international research on career education, career development and the impact of digital transformation in higher education, a systematic review of the existing literature reveals several significant gaps in the field of career trend education for Social Work students.

First, most international studies have primarily focused on career guidance for university students in general or on the development of professional identity and practice competencies among Social Work students. However, they have paid limited attention to the nature of career trend education, which is a crucial factor in shaping students' career motivation and professional self-positioning. Given that the Social Work profession requires alignment with professional values, personal characteristics, empathy and long-term professional commitment, career education in this field demands a distinctive approach that differs from that of other disciplines. Nevertheless, current research has yet to develop a systematic and profession-specific career education model that adequately reflects the unique nature of Social Work.

Furthermore, although digital transformation has become a global trend and digital technologies are increasingly integrated into Social Work education and training very few international studies have conducted empirical evaluations of the effectiveness of technology-enhanced career education models. Career guidance activities utilizing digital platforms such as e-portfolios, online career mentoring and simulated practice scenarios have largely been described or analyzed from a theoretical perspective. However, their impacts on students' career confidence, career readiness and professional identity development have rarely been validated through empirical research. Consequently, scientific evidence regarding the effectiveness of digital career education remains limited.

In addition, as the Social Work profession undergoes substantial changes driven by the digitalization of social services, the demand for digital competencies among social workers has become increasingly evident. However, most international

studies have focused primarily on ethical issues related to technology use or the risks associated with digital environments. Comparatively little research has identified the core digital competencies that Social Work students need to acquire during their education and training. The integration of these digital competencies into career education models has also received minimal scholarly attention.

Another notable gap is the absence of research that integrates the three key dimensions of career trends, Social Work professional competencies and digital transformation within a unified educational framework. Existing studies generally address these dimensions separately, resulting in a lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework capable of explaining how digital transformation influences the development of career orientations and professional preparedness among Social Work students. Moreover, the majority of international studies have been conducted in developed countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia and European nations where socio-economic conditions, cultural contexts and levels of digitalization differ considerably from those of developing countries. As a result, there is a lack of research reflecting the specific needs, characteristics and practical conditions of countries such as Vietnam where Social Work education systems are still evolving and digital transformation is progressing unevenly across educational institutions.

These research gaps highlight the urgent need for in-depth studies on trends in Social Work career education in the context of digital transformation, particularly in Vietnam where the Social Work profession is expanding rapidly and the demand for qualified human resources continues to increase.

## 2. RESULTS

### *2.1. Research on Career Education and Career Trends among University Students*

In the context of globalization, digital transformation, and the rapid development of the knowledge economy, career education in higher education has increasingly been regarded as a strategic component of high-quality human resource development. The rapid transformation of labor markets driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution has altered occupational structures, skill requirements and employment trends for graduates. Consequently, many countries and international educational organizations have recognized career education as a critical mechanism for enhancing learners' career adaptability, competitiveness and long-term career sustainability.

International research approaches career education from various perspectives, including vocational psychology, career development, educational studies and the sociology of professions. According to Brown and Lent (2019), career guidance not only assists students in selecting suitable careers but also contributes to the formation of professional identity, the development of self-awareness and long-term career management capabilities. The authors argue that effective career education programs generally focus on three core competency areas: self-assessment, career decision-making and career planning. Students with a strong understanding of their interests, values and personal competencies are more likely to make appropriate career choices, thereby increasing future job satisfaction and career stability.

In addition, numerous studies emphasize the importance of career adaptability in an increasingly volatile labor market. Savickas et al. (2009) argue that career adaptability reflects an individual's readiness to cope with changes in the work environment, occupational requirements, and broader social conditions. According to the authors, students with higher levels of career adaptability tend to be more proactive in learning, more flexible in career planning and better prepared for career transitions in the future. This perspective has gained increasing attention as contemporary employment is no longer characterized by the long-term stability that once prevailed.

Many studies have also focused on the development of professional identity among university students. Trede, Macklin, and Bridges (2012) contend that higher education not only provides disciplinary knowledge but also facilitates the formation of professional identity through learning experiences, social interactions and professional practice. Professional identity is considered a key factor in fostering career commitment, adaptability and motivation within continuously changing work environments.

Another stream of research highlights the role of career management competencies. Bridgstock (2009) argues that students in modern society need to be equipped not only with professional knowledge but also with the ability to build professional networks, identify employment opportunities, develop personal brands and adapt flexibly to labor market changes. According to the author, contemporary career education should shift from a model of "providing career information" to one focused on "developing career management competencies."

Beyond these foundational studies, recent research has increasingly examined the impact of digital transformation on career education and career trends among university students. UNESCO (2021) argues that education in the digital era must move beyond knowledge transmission toward the development of comprehensive competencies, particularly digital competence, adaptability and lifelong learning skills. The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), Big Data, online learning and digital platforms has fundamentally transformed how students access career information and plan their professional futures.

Research conducted by OECD (2021) indicates that the rapid advancement of automation and AI is reshaping the global employment landscape. While many traditional occupations face the risk of displacement, numerous new professions requiring digital and interdisciplinary skills are emerging. Consequently, career education must extend beyond career selection and focus on helping students develop future skills, adaptability and lifelong learning mindsets.

Several recent studies have also focused on the concept of employability. According to Clarke (2018), employability depends not only on disciplinary knowledge but also on soft skills, digital competencies, communication skills, critical thinking and career adaptability. In the context of digital transformation, employability has increasingly become an important indicator of higher education quality.

Furthermore, studies conducted in the post-COVID-19 period reveal significant changes in students' career preferences and aspirations. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), students increasingly prioritize careers that offer flexibility, digitally enabled work environments and sustainable development opportunities. At the same time, competencies such as digital literacy, intercultural communication, emotional management and adaptability are regarded as essential skills for the future workforce.

In the field of technology-enhanced career education, recent studies have highlighted the role of e-portfolios, digital career mentoring, artificial intelligence in career counseling and learning analytics systems that support students in developing personalized competency profiles. Digital platforms expand access to career information, enhance the personalization of career guidance services and strengthen connections between educational institutions and employers.

Despite these positive developments, many studies also point to several limitations in current career education practices within higher education. Some career guidance programs remain largely informational in nature and pay insufficient attention to developing students' career adaptability, career management competencies and reflective career capabilities. Moreover, although digital transformation has introduced numerous innovative tools for career guidance, empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of technology-integrated career education models remains limited particularly in developing countries.

Within the field of Social Work, research on career trend education remains relatively scarce compared to disciplines such as business, management, economics, and technology. Yet Social Work is a highly human-centered profession characterized by intensive social interaction and strong exposure to social change, technological developments and evolving welfare needs. Recent studies suggest that Social Work students require not only professional competencies but also digital competencies, career adaptability and the ability to support clients within increasingly digitalized environments. However, both theoretical and practical research on career trend education for Social Work students in the context of digital transformation remains limited.

Overall, both domestic and international studies have contributed significantly to clarifying the theoretical foundations of career education, career development and career trends among university students in the era of digital transformation. Nevertheless, most existing research focuses on university students in general or on disciplines such as economics, engineering, management, and technology. In-depth studies examining career trend education for Social Work students particularly under the influence of digital transformation and artificial intelligence remain limited. This represents a significant research gap that warrants further investigation in the current context.

## ***2.2. Research on Career Orientation and Career Education in the Field of Social Work***

Compared with many other professions, career orientation in the field of Social Work possesses distinctive characteristics because it is closely associated with humanitarian values, social responsibility, professional ethics and helping activities. Therefore, career education in Social Work extends beyond assisting students in selecting an appropriate profession; it also aims to facilitate the development of professional identity, strengthen professional commitment and cultivate professional practice competencies among learners (Hugman, 2010). In the context of contemporary society and the rapid advancement

of digital transformation, numerous international studies have sought to clarify the factors influencing career trends, career adaptability and professional development among Social Work students.

One of the most extensively researched areas concerns the role of professional values in shaping the career orientation of Social Work students. According to Hugman (2010), professional education in Social Work should help students understand the core values of the profession, including social justice, respect for human dignity, human rights, social responsibility and the protection of vulnerable populations. The author argues that professional values play a foundational role in shaping students' professional awareness, career motivation and professional identity. Students with a strong understanding of professional values tend to demonstrate greater professional commitment, stronger resilience in overcoming occupational challenges and a higher likelihood of remaining in the profession over the long term.

This perspective is further reinforced by Banks (2012) in her work on ethics and values in Social Work. According to the author, professional values not only guide professional behavior but also directly influence professional decision-making, the ability to address social situations and professional responsibility after graduation. Banks argues that professional education in Social Work should be viewed as a process of developing professional character, in which the cultivation of humanitarian values plays a central role in learners' sustainable professional development.

In addition to professional values, numerous studies have examined the role of professional competencies in the career development of Social Work students. According to Bogo and Vayda (1998), professional competence in Social Work encompasses not only theoretical knowledge but also communication skills, client assessment skills, intervention planning, social problem-solving abilities and reflective practice. The authors emphasize that field practice and real-world professional experiences are particularly important for developing professional competence and career confidence among students.

Research conducted by Papadaki and Papadaki (2020) also indicates that Social Work students often encounter difficulties in translating theoretical knowledge into practical professional skills. According to the authors, although many students possess strong theoretical foundations, they frequently lack confidence when engaging in professional activities such as client assessment, intervention planning, and managing complex social situations. This finding suggests that the gap between education and professional practice remains one of the major challenges facing Social Work professional education today.

Within the literature on Social Work professional education, field education and practice supervision are widely regarded as among the most influential factors affecting students' professional development. According to McDonald (2018), the quality of practice supervision has a direct impact on the development of professional identity, career confidence and practice readiness among Social Work students. Students who receive consistent professional guidance, timely feedback, and opportunities to engage directly in real-life professional situations tend to demonstrate stronger career adaptability and higher levels of professional commitment.

Furthermore, many studies emphasize the importance of experiential learning in Social Work education. According to Bogo and Vayda (1998), practical professional experiences not only enable students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts but also foster communication skills, professional decision-making abilities and reflective practice. The authors argue that direct experiences and interactions with clients allow students to gain a deeper understanding of the profession, thereby strengthening career motivation and fostering sustainable career orientations.

Another line of research focuses on professional identity and career adaptability among Social Work students. Trevithick (2012) notes that Social Work students frequently face emotional and psychological pressures during professional practice, particularly when working with vulnerable populations or addressing complex social problems. Therefore, professional education should not only develop students' professional competencies but also enhance psychological adaptability, self-care skills, and commitment to professional values.

Similarly, Savickas et al. (2009) argue that career adaptability reflects an individual's readiness to cope with changes in the labor market and broader social environment. According to the authors, students with high levels of career adaptability tend to be more proactive in learning, more flexible in career planning and better able to adjust to evolving professional environments. In Social Work, career adaptability involves not only adapting to workplace conditions but also responding effectively to professional pressures, social changes and emerging occupational demands in the digital era.

In recent years, under the influence of digital transformation, increasing attention has been devoted to digital competencies in Social Work education. According to Reamer (2018), digital technologies are significantly transforming Social Work practice through mechanisms such as remote social work services, electronic case management, online client support and digital counseling platforms. The author argues that Social Work students must therefore be equipped not only with professional knowledge but also with technological competencies, online communication skills and an understanding of professional ethics in digital environments.

Research by Mishna et al. (2021) further highlights the growing importance of digital competencies for contemporary social workers. According to the authors, digital competence in Social Work extends beyond technical skills to include the ability to utilize social data, manage client information, collaborate across disciplines through digital platforms and deliver online social support services. They contend that integrating digital competency development into Social Work education can significantly enhance graduates' career adaptability and professional effectiveness.

In addition, Redecker and Punie (2017) argue that digital competence in contemporary higher education should be understood broadly, encompassing information literacy, digital communication, problem-solving in digital environments and adaptation to a digitalized society. This perspective is particularly relevant to Social Work education where professional practice is increasingly intertwined with technology and online work environments.

Beyond individual and professional competency factors, numerous studies have emphasized the role of the educational environment in shaping the career orientation of Social Work students. According to McDonald (2018), positive learning environments, faculty support, opportunities for professional experience and strong partnerships between universities and field agencies significantly influence students' professional development. Students who regularly engage in professional practice within supportive learning environments tend to exhibit greater career confidence, stronger career adaptability and clearer professional goals.

Overall, international research suggests that the career orientations of Social Work students are influenced by multiple interrelated factors. Prominent among these are professional values, professional competencies, field practice experiences, educational environments, digital competencies and adaptability to professional settings in the context of digitalization. Studies indicate that professional values play a guiding role in shaping students' perceptions, motivations and professional commitment while professional competencies and practical experiences contribute to the development of practice skills, self-confidence, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world contexts. Furthermore, educational environments and support from field agencies significantly influence the formation of professional identity and career development trajectories. Particularly in the current era of digital transformation, digital competencies and the ability to adapt to digitalized professional environments are becoming increasingly important in enhancing career adaptability, professional effectiveness and responsiveness to the demands of the modern labor market.

These studies have made important contributions to understanding the role of professional education in developing professional identity, enhancing professional competence and strengthening career adaptability among Social Work students in contemporary society. However, most existing research has examined these factors separately and has not yet developed an integrated career trend education model that simultaneously incorporates professional values, professional competencies, digital competencies and career adaptability for Social Work students in the context of digital transformation. Moreover, the number of empirical studies evaluating the effectiveness of technology-integrated career trend education interventions in Social Work education remains relatively limited. This represents an important research gap that warrants further investigation in future studies.

### ***2.3. Research on Social Work Career Education in the Context of Digital Transformation***

In recent years, digital transformation has become a major trend in the development of higher education worldwide. The rapid advancement of digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), Big Data, the Internet of Things (IoT), and online learning platforms has profoundly transformed teaching and learning practices, educational management and learners' professional development. Within this context, numerous studies have examined the impact of digital transformation on career education, career trends and career adaptability among university students.

One of the most prominent research directions concerns the relationship between digital transformation and changing professional competency requirements in the workforce. According to UNESCO (2020), education in the digital era should move beyond the transmission of knowledge and focus on the development of comprehensive competencies, particularly digital competence, career adaptability and lifelong learning skills. The organization argues that digital transformation is

fundamentally reshaping occupational structures and labor markets, causing many traditional occupations to evolve or disappear while generating new professional demands associated with technology and digitalized work environments (UNESCO, 2020).

Similarly, Redecker and Punie (2017) argue that digital competence has become one of the core competencies required of learners in higher education. According to the authors, digital competence encompasses not only the ability to use technology but also skills related to information searching and evaluation, digital communication, problem-solving in digital environments and adaptation to technological change. This perspective suggests that career education in the context of digital transformation should adopt an integrated approach that combines professional competency development with the enhancement of students' digital competencies (Redecker & Punie, 2017).

Many studies have also examined changes in career education and professional development resulting from digital technologies. Bridgstock (2009) argues that in today's knowledge economy, students require not only disciplinary expertise but also the ability to manage their careers, build personal brands, leverage online professional networks and adapt flexibly to rapidly changing labor markets. The author contends that higher education should shift from a knowledge-transmission model to one focused on developing professional competencies and lifelong learning capabilities among students (Bridgstock, 2009).

In addition, numerous studies emphasize the role of digital technologies in transforming career education practices. Kettunen, Sampson and Vuorinen (2015) argue that online career guidance platforms, electronic competency portfolios (e-portfolios), professional social networking services and artificial intelligence are creating substantial changes in contemporary career guidance activities. According to the authors, digital technologies expand access to career information, enhance the personalization of career counseling services and empower students to take a more active role in their own professional development (Kettunen et al., 2015).

Alongside these positive impacts, several studies have also highlighted the challenges posed by digital transformation for career education. According to Selwyn (2016), the digitalization of education may widen disparities in access to technology, digital literacy and educational opportunities among different groups of learners. Furthermore, excessive reliance on technology may reduce social interaction, weaken face-to-face communication skills and limit students' opportunities for authentic experiential learning (Selwyn, 2016).

For professions characterized by intensive social interaction, such as Social Work, the effects of digital transformation are even more pronounced. Reamer (2018) argues that technology is significantly reshaping Social Work practice through innovations such as online counseling, electronic case management systems and remote social support services. As a result, educational institutions must not only revise curriculum content but also prioritize the development of digital competencies, online communication skills and professional ethics in digital environments for Social Work students (Reamer, 2018).

Overall, existing studies consistently demonstrate that digital transformation is exerting a profound influence on higher education and career education. The literature not only confirms the importance of digital competence and career adaptability but also highlights the need to redesign career education practices for increasingly digitalized environments. However, current research has largely approached digital transformation from the perspective of technological innovation or general pedagogical reform while studies specifically focusing on Social Work career education in the context of digital transformation remain relatively limited.

In particular, research integrating career education, digital competence, career adaptability and the distinctive characteristics of the Social Work profession remains scarce. Moreover, the relationships among these factors within the contemporary context of digital transformation have not yet been adequately clarified. This represents a significant research gap that requires further investigation and theoretical development in future studies.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Research has shown that students' career orientations are influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including career awareness, professional values, career motivation, educational environment, professional experiences, professional competencies, digital competencies and the ability to adapt to the modern labor market. Among these factors, professional values are considered fundamental in shaping students' professional identity and professional commitment. Professional competencies and practical experiences enable learners to develop professional skills, career confidence and the ability to

apply knowledge in real-world contexts. Meanwhile, digital competencies and career adaptability are increasingly becoming essential prerequisites for students to adjust successfully to digitalized work environments and the demands of contemporary society.

Within the field of Social Work, existing studies have begun to clarify the distinctive characteristics of the profession as well as the role of professional education in fostering professional identity, developing practice competencies and enhancing career adaptability among students (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; McDonald, 2018). Numerous studies also emphasize that the career orientations of Social Work students are simultaneously influenced by various factors, including professional value systems, field practice experiences, educational environments, field supervision activities and professional support from faculty members and practice agencies. More recently, some studies have highlighted the impact of digital technologies on Social Work practice and the growing need to develop digital competencies among students in order to meet the requirements of contemporary professional environments (Reamer, 2018; Mishna et al., 2021).

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